

INTRODUCTION

[121] functioning of early Sudanese societies. It will also attempt to demonstrate
[174] how European conquest affected the political organization of the Mossi and contributed to its ultimate decline.

The kingdom of Ouagadougou was selected as the main object of study, primarily because it emerged as the most important Mossi polity and retained this position through the greater part of Mossi history. Attention will be given to the other Mossi polities and the three other Mossi kingdoms—Yatenga, Tenkodogo, and the more remote Fada-N'Gourma, all of which resemble Ouagadougou—only insofar as they affect the history of Ouagadougou or highlight the basic nature of Mossi government.

[101] The Mossi are a Sudanese Negroid population in the new Republic of
[161] the Upper Volta.² They number about 2,200,000, or approximately half of the country's total population. Their ancestral territory, which they call
[131] *Mogho* (land of the Mossi), covers some 30,000 square miles in the southern
[133] part of the Republic. It is a huge plateau, lying from 1,000 to 1,600 feet above sea level, and broken by three low mountain ranges and numerous small hills. The Kipirsi range in the northeast has an average height of about 2,000 feet and includes the sacred mountain of the Mossi, known as Plimpikou. The Boussouma range to the east reaches a height of some 1,500 feet, and the Naouri range in the southeast is almost as high.

● [132] The climate of Mossi country is typical of the Sudanic zone. There are two main seasons, one cold and dry, the other hot and wet. The first begins in November with the coming of the harmattan and ends in January, the coolest month, when the average temperature is about 70° F. and the humidity about 12 per cent. The hot season extends from March to October. In July, the warmest month, the temperature reaches a high of 88° F. and the humidity 78 per cent. Violent dust storms herald the rains, which begin late in May and end in September. The rain falls almost entirely in heavy showers and thunderstorms, and the average annual fall is between 30 and 40 inches. In those years when the rainfall is about 40 inches and is regularly spaced, the Mossi can look forward to a good harvest. When the rainfall is below 30 inches and is spaced irregularly during the planting season, the threat of famine is serious. So narrow is the margin of rainfall for agriculture that in 1956 the people of one Mossi district anxiously awaited "two rains" (two showers), without which they feared that in 1957 there would be a difficult "hungry period" (the time between the exhaustion of one year's crops and the maturing of the next).

[133] Mossi country is drained by only three rivers: the Black Volta with its two chief tributaries, the Sourou and the Debere, and the Red and White Voltas with their numerous small tributaries. Only the Black Volta flows

CHAPTER 9

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Trade and Markets Among the Mossi People

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The Mossi represent the dominant population of the Voltaic Republic, numbering about 1,600,000 out of some 3,200,000 inhabitants. They represent the unique example of a group which has preserved its ethnic identity and political autonomy through all the vicissitudes of Sudanic history until it was conquered by the French in 1896. Tradition records that the people who became the Mossi left the Dagomba region in present-day Ghana during the eleventh century and moved into the bend of the Niger River, carving out three large kingdoms and smaller principalities in the process. At the head of these still extant kingdoms are rulers (*Moro Nabas*) who formerly held feudal-like control over the provinces, districts and villages which comprise their domains. The villages, with their patri-local, polygynous, extended family households, formed the basic Mossi settlement pattern. A complex hierarchical administrative apparatus carried the power of the Mossi rulers into the smallest villages, and funneled taxes and tribute back to them. This structure still exists, but of course it has been modified by the French.

The Mossi were and are still divided into stratified royal, noble and commoner patrilineages. Characteristic of this lineage system is a process by which royal sub-lineages descend serially until they merge with the mass of commoner lineages. Below the lineages there once were large non-Mossi groups of serfs and slaves, but these people have now been grouped into lineages and have become Mossicized.

The topography of Mossi country is typical of the Sudanic grasslands. It is an immense plain, some 1,500 feet above sea level and broken only by three low mountain ranges and numerous small hills. The annual total rainfall is between 30 and 40 inches, and falls almost entirely as heavy showers or thundershowers during the period from June to September. So narrow is the margin of rainfall for successful crop cultivation that any variation in the cycle results in low crop yields and a difficult "hungry period" the following year before the new crops are harvested. The Mossi do not practice irrigation, and would have trouble doing so because the three Volta Rivers which drain their territory serve as drainage chiefly during the rainy season. Only the Black Volta has water all year round; the